

# Neither Accidental Nor Intended: Pregnancy as an Adolescent Identity Project Among Hispanic Teenage Mothers in Doña Ana County, New Mexico

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## Abstract

Social scientists have dispelled teen pregnancy's public characterization as inherently pathological and instead frequently study teen reproductive practices as the result of either socioeconomic and cultural constraints or individual processes of identity construction. Through semistructured interviews with 15 young Hispanic mothers in southern New Mexico, I consider both macro-level contexts and individual-level identification processes in understanding teens' reproductive decision making. Highlighting narratives of sexual and reproductive passivity in the region's impoverished *colonias*, I describe how young women in these communities explained their pregnancies as the result of what I have termed *sterility cuentos*, their boyfriends' false stories of sterility. I go on to tease apart the contradictory narratives of girls in metropolitan Las Cruces who called their pregnancies accidents despite wanting and planning to become pregnant. Through thematic narrative analysis, I argue that teen pregnancy can be thought of as part of a larger adolescent identity project in which teens in particular social locations reproduce, negotiate, and/or reconstruct various axes of

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their identities through their reproductive decisions within the context of significant constraints. I conclude by considering implications for teen pregnancy prevention efforts in light of this vast diversity in how Hispanic teens become pregnant and experience motherhood.

### **Keywords**

adolescent parenting, early/emerging adulthood, identity issues, Latinos (U.S), qualitative methods, sexuality

And I use to, I use to tell my dad “I’m not going to be a parent. I’m not going to get pregnant, Dad. I swear I’m not stupid.” And there I was . . . pregnant, at fifteen. Not even sixteen or seventeen. Fifteen. I was still, I was still a kid. A kid.

—Lidia, teen mother in a colonia

We were happy ’cause we were gonna be pregnant, and we were not like in a shock, like, “Oh my god this wasn’t supposed to happen.” So, she wasn’t like, planned, but she was kind of planned.

—Josephina, teen mother in Las Cruces

## **Introduction**

Lidia and Josephina, although living vastly different lives, both represent Hispanic<sup>1</sup> teen mothers. Pregnancies like theirs have been an issue of central concern for decades in the United States, where Hispanic teens are considered most at risk of adolescent childbearing. Despite vast recent declines in teen childbearing across all racial and ethnic groups, the United States continues to have the highest rate of adolescent childbearing among industrialized countries (United Nations, 2014), and Hispanics remain more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to give birth as teens (Romero et al., 2016). As a result, Hispanic teen mothers frequently hear stories, public opinions, and expert analyses concluding that their pregnancies resulted from irresponsible decision making, limited access to contraception resources among the poor, cultural value systems that normalize women’s subordination to men, or one of several other one-size-fits-all explanations that have informed countless policies and interventions aimed toward preventing early childbearing (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014; Luker, 1996). Yet, for Lidia, Josephina, and many of the

other young Hispanic women who participated in the current project, none of these accounts alone suffice to explain their pregnancies. In this study, I present stories from two groups of young Hispanic mothers in very different social contexts. Through thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008), I examine how their reproductive choices shaped and were shaped by their processes of identification within the constraints of these contexts. In doing so, I aim to contribute to a growing body of literature that critiques stigmatizing, simplistic views of teen childbearing and instead privileges the voices of teen mothers themselves to highlight the complexity of their subjective experiences in reproductive decision making. I begin with an overview of this literature.

### **Vagueness in the Consequences, Causes, and Intendedness of Teen Pregnancy: Considerations of Class and Culture**

Social scientists have long questioned the supposedly dire health and economic consequences of adolescent childbearing. Though conventional wisdom holds that teen pregnancy contributes to serious medical complications as well as future poverty among teen parents and their children, a large body of research has found scant evidence that the medical complications and poor economic outcomes correlated with teen pregnancy are in fact *caused* by early childbearing (Hamburg, 2008; Hotz, McElroy, & Sanders, 2005; Kearney & Levine, 2012; Luker, 1996; Mullin, 2005; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1990), suggesting that these correlations reflect selection effects. That is, teens with already depressed economic potential and poor health care are also more likely to give birth in their teen years (Hamburg, 2008; Kearney & Levine, 2012; Levine & Painter, 2003), and these factors may result in negative outcomes whether young women have their babies during adolescence or delay motherhood until their 20s or beyond. Some scholars have argued that teen pregnancy is construed as deviant, even immoral, not because it causes societal problems, but because teen mothers resist dominant prescriptions of young female sexuality, making them a convenient target of blame (Erickson, 1998; Geronimus, 2004; Luker, 1996). Racialized and classed stereotypes (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014; Ward, 1995), such as that of the welfare mother (Sparks, 2003; Yardley, 2008), reinforce views of teen pregnancy as a form of social deviance. Despite their flaws, these mainstream assumptions inform authoritative knowledge on the causes and consequences of teen pregnancy, and this knowledge in turn informs policies directed toward teenagers (Wilson & Huntington, 2006).

More sympathetic views toward teen childbearing locate its causes not in adolescents' personal irresponsibility, but in some teens' limited contraception

access, reportedly leading to overwhelmingly unintended teen pregnancies. Indeed, survey data support the view that most teen pregnancies are accidental. Between 2001 and 2008, approximately 82% of adolescent mothers responding to national surveys reported their pregnancies as unintended (Finer & Zolna, 2013). Yet analyses of large-scale surveys have found inconsistencies in how women report their pregnancy intentions, with about 25% of mothers who respond to multiple surveys reporting different answers to questions on whether a pregnancy was intended (Bankole & Westoff, 1998; Kaufmann, Morris, & Spitz, 1997). This inconsistency suggests that large-scale survey data conceal nuances in pregnancy intentions, a finding that has prompted some researchers to characterize “intended” and “unintended” pregnancies as opposing ends of a continuum rather than as strict classifications (Bachrach & Newcomer, 1999). Understanding the decision making of teens somewhere in the middle of this continuum is essential for elucidating their reproductive behaviors, as shown by findings that women and teenage girls who feel ambivalent about becoming pregnant often use contraceptives inconsistently (Brückner, Martin, & Bearman, 2004). Based on this need to better understand survey discrepancies, Santelli and colleagues (2003) call for more research that clarifies the meaning of pregnancy intentions among individual women. A number of qualitative studies on adolescent childbearing, though not explicitly focused on pregnancy intention, can help us begin to understand factors that shape whether and how some teens plan to become pregnant.

### *Class and Teen Pregnancy Intentions*

Many of these studies suggest that socioeconomic class can help predict where some teen pregnancies fall on the continuum between intended and unintended. Pregnancy among middle-class teens with greater access to reproductive health services may sometimes signal ambivalence toward the prospect of pregnancy and its associated reproductive risk-taking (Luker, 1978). Low-income teens, on the other hand, are often prone to structural and social barriers that limit their reproductive health knowledge and resources (Chernick et al., 2015; Forte & Judd, 1998; Gilliam, Warden, & Tapia, 2004), leading to a potentially greater incidence of straightforwardly accidental, unintended pregnancy. Yet reduced contraception resources are not the only disadvantage low-income teens face. Low-income urban Black teens, for example, disproportionately experience health disadvantages in response to the chronic stressors of poverty, which drastically reduce healthy life expectancy (Geronimus, 2004). Thus, according to Geronimus, the pattern in urban Black communities of childbearing in the teenage years and early 20s reflects an adaptive response to the fact that mothers are likely to be healthiest for

childbearing and childrearing when they are young. Others have found that teens from low-income families may welcome pregnancy in contexts where holding high academic and career aspirations seems unrealistic (Smith, Skinner, & Fenwick, 2011). These findings demonstrate that pregnancies in the context of poverty are not always accidental; instead, socioeconomic disadvantage can create a wide range of implications for shaping teens' pregnancy intentions. Furthermore, as Torres and Weeks (2006) point out, structural influences are rarely the only factors contributing to the pregnancies of teens living in poverty. A complete analysis must also take into consideration the particular culturally constructed meanings that constitute teens' lived experiences.

### *Hispanic Culture and Teen Pregnancy Intentions*

A cultural account of adolescent sexuality recognizes that the meanings, perceptions, and beliefs relevant to Hispanic teens are shaped largely by the shared values and worldviews that constitute their cultures. As such, an analysis of the cultural values to which Hispanic teens may potentially be exposed is important for understanding their sexual behaviors, including their sex, contraception, and pregnancy intentions. Such values may include conservative views of sexuality that lead community members to stigmatize teenage girls who plan for sex (Erickson, 1998; James-Hawkins & Broaddus, 2016; Jimenez, Potts, & Jimenez, 2002), eschew discussions with teens about contraception (García, 2012), or structure women as subordinate to men in sexual decision making (Gutmann, 2007). Pamela Erickson's interviews with low-income teens from a variety of Hispanic subgroups in mid-1990s Los Angeles revealed a cultural sexual initiation script in which young men were expected to pressure for sex, and young women were expected to be ignorant about sex and resist at first but eventually acquiesce in a heat of the moment exchange that showed they had not been planning for sex (1998). She suggested that this cultural script accounted for a number of the unplanned teen pregnancies in the Hispanic community, especially among teens less acculturated into mainstream American values. Indeed, level of acculturation is frequently considered an important factor in Hispanic teens' sexual and reproductive practices (see Afaible-Munsuz & Brindis's [2006] review).

While this type of analysis of cultural values provides a useful starting point for thinking about the meaning systems that influence Hispanic teen sexuality, it risks becoming overly deterministic by losing sight of the view that culture is never static, but rather a dynamic process of social meaning-making (García, 2012; Taylor, 2003). Furthermore, Hispanic groups in the United States, formed by a conglomeration of people with diverse national

origins, languages, traditions, and relationships to other Americans, are especially done a disservice by the use of a general cultural label (Bean & Tienda, 1987; Melville, 1994). Therefore, values labeled as Hispanic may better be described as Hispanic cultural tropes, or recognizable patterns and meanings that continually transform yet have persisted in some respects over time among many macrosystems in which Hispanic groups participate. Agentic individuals who are exposed to these tropes can draw on them in the production of meaning-making and sense-making about themselves and their worlds (Willis, 2000). Lisa Dietrich (1998) has used this view of cultural meaning-making to understand Hispanic teen sexuality. Dietrich found the Hispanic teens she worked with to be “cultural pragmatists” who drew on various Hispanic and mainstream American cultural patterns strategically to frame their behavior. Indeed, some Hispanic teens have a wide range of cultural material at their disposal, a consideration that complicates how we understand the role of culture in shaping reproductive intentions.

In short, understanding Hispanic teen pregnancy intentions will require paying adequate attention to teen agency in addition to teens’ socioeconomic and cultural contexts. The studies of teen pregnancy reviewed thus far effectively dispel the stigmatizing deviant choices narrative of teen pregnancy, but, with the exception of Dietrich’s study, their almost exclusive emphasis on socioeconomic class or ethnic cultural context obscures the ways teens strategically negotiate economic constraints and cultural values. To qualitatively understand these negotiations and better theorize the role of teen agency in their reproductive decisions, I turn to narrative models of identity development and examine ways they have been used to understand teen pregnancy.

## **Theoretical Framework: Teen Pregnancy as Identity Negotiation Within Constraint**

Narrative approaches in psychology and other social sciences traditionally understand identity as a subjective, dynamic process of constructing a coherent life story (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). These approaches conceptualize identity not as an essence or set of values and behaviors that one *has*, but rather, “something that one *does*” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 5). Individuals construct various dimensions of identity by agentially pulling on cultural meanings and tropes, the media through which we “communicate who we are or, more accurately, who we would like to be” (Dietrich, 1998, p. 7). By reproducing dominant narratives or adopting alternative narratives about various dimensions of one’s identity, actors embrace and/or challenge the power dynamics that structure their social positioning (McLean & Syed, 2015).

Acknowledging identity development as a major project of adolescence (Erikson, 1968), several scholars have applied narrative models of identity to studies of teen pregnancy, highlighting the stories that teen mothers themselves tell in order to understand how teens use reproductive decisions to make meaning about themselves and their place in society. This approach understands teen pregnancy not as an effect of certain socioeconomic or cultural factors, but as part of a process of identity development in which teens are active participants. Through their interviews with disadvantaged teen mothers in England, Coleman and Cater (2006) found that some teens explicitly planned to become pregnant in an effort to forge new, more positive identities and purposeful life courses. Breen and McLean (2010) and Sheeran, Jones, and Rowe (2016) recount teen narratives of pregnancy as redemption, highlighting the ways teens used childbearing and motherhood to construct positive changes and spur self-transformation into resilient young adults. Barcelos and Gubrium (2014) and Kelly (2000) also encountered redemption stories among teen mothers, along with other narratives that simultaneously reproduced and reinterpreted dominant understandings of adolescent pregnancy as teens strategically created nonstigmatized identities. In each of these studies, the authors focused heavily on the ways teens exercised agency as they constructed their identities, negotiating dominant and alternative narratives about pregnancy and motherhood.

These studies' emphasis on agency contributes a much-needed perspective to analyses of teen pregnancy that traditionally have focused more on socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Yet, as McLean and Syed (2015) point out, scholars using narrative approaches often overemphasize agency in analyses of identity construction, leading them to ignore the ways these contexts constrain processes of identification. Indeed, identification takes place within macrosystems that pose a number of constraints (Bronfenbrenner, 1989) through systems of power and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). Various dimensions of identity—including ethnic, gender, and class identity—are ascribed within hierarchies of power that may limit the meaning available for processes of identification, and the individual must negotiate aspects of identity within these constraints (McLean & Syed, 2015). Thus, a complete analysis of teen pregnancy will involve integrating these agency-centered approaches with those that highlight social contexts and power dynamics.

In this study, I combine narrative approaches to identity construction, which focus primarily on actors' agency, with the structural and cultural approaches to teen pregnancy, which focus primarily on macro-level constraints, to understand teens' reproductive decision making. I argue that teens must negotiate dominant narratives about their ethnic, gender, and class identities as they make reproductive decisions, and that some teens are more

limited than others in the amount of freedom they have in this process. Integral to this analysis is the role of intersectionality, which recognizes the limitations of using any one axis of identification—whether ethnicity, gender, or class—as an analytical category (McCall, 2005). Instead, an intersectional approach to identity construction examines how various dimensions of identity interlock to produce unique social locations, positioning individuals to construct their identities in the context of highly particular disadvantages and privileges (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990). According to this framework, teens may make decisions about sex, contraception, and pregnancy according to the intersecting ethnic, gender, and class characteristics assigned to them or to which they aspire within the macrosystems in which they operate. As such, this study analyzes teens' narratives about their pregnancy intentions as contributing to larger projects of meaning-making about who they are. Through interviews conducted in 2012 with 15 young Hispanic mothers, I address the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** How did Hispanic teenage girls make decisions about sex, contraception, pregnancy, and motherhood?

**Research Question 2:** How did the teens' intersectional ethnic, class, and gender positioning influence these reproductive decisions?

**Research Question 3:** How did the teens' decisions about sex, contraception, pregnancy, and motherhood in turn shape their intersectional ethnic, class, and gender identities?

**Research Question 4:** To what extent did these teens feel agency and/or constraint in making reproductive decisions and constructing their identities?

## Method

All of the young mothers who participated in this study lived in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, a county that is approximately 67% Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). In 2012, Doña Ana County had a rate of 51 births per 1,000 teenage girls (Bureau of Vital Records and Health Statistics, 2012) well above the national average of 29 (Ventura, Hamilton, & Matthews, 2014). With a population equally split between the small city of Las Cruces and rural communities federally designated as *colonias* that surround the city, the county harbors a range of class and ethnic identities. Las Cruces residents, for example, enjoy mostly middle-class incomes, while *colonias* residents often rely on seasonal farm labor jobs that place their incomes hovering at the federal poverty level (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, n.d.). While most Las Cruces residents are either monolingual English



speakers or bilingual, many colonias residents speak monolingual Spanish, with the exception of the youth, who learn English in their schools. This diversity in what constitutes the profiles of Hispanic teen mothers makes this county a prime case study of Hispanic teen pregnancy.

Gatekeepers from the county's Health and Human Services Department helped to recruit the study's first participants, young women who identified as Hispanic and had their first child as teenagers. Participants were told that the purpose of the study was to better understand the experiences of Hispanic teen pregnancy and motherhood. Through additional snowball sampling in Las Cruces (Bernard, 2011), 15 young mothers in total were interviewed, nine of whom were from Las Cruces and six of whom were from the surrounding colonias. As displayed in Table 1, all participants first became pregnant when they were high school students between ages 15 and 18, with a median age of 17 at first pregnancy. At the time of the interviews, participants were between ages 17 and 26. Socioeconomic status was classified during the interview process as low-income or middle-income based on participant reports of their parents' occupations and/or parents' reliance on public assistance at the time of their pregnancies. The one-on-one interviews took place in either a private meeting room at the local public library, at health clinics contracted with the county Health and Human Services Department, via Skype video conference, or in participants' homes, depending on which location was most convenient for them. All interviews were conducted in English by the author, who was close in age to the participants and familiar with the Las Cruces and colonias communities. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

The semistructured interviews were interpreted using thematic narrative analysis. Individuals use narratives, or stories about personal experiences organized by plot and theme, to create coherence out of disordered experience (Bruner, 1991; Riessman, 2012), making narrative analysis a useful technique to study how individuals construct identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Singer, 2004). The thematic style of narrative analysis focuses primarily on the content of participants' stories rather than on the structure or style of the narratives or how the interviewer's own subjectivity influences the narratives participants construct. Interpretation of this content is based heavily on pre-established themes and prior theory but can also be guided by themes and theories that emerge from the data (Riessman, 2008). In this study, interview questions were developed from pre-established themes based on the literature on Hispanic teen pregnancy, motherhood, and identity. These themes included *first sexual experience*, *decisions about contraception*, *pregnancy intentions*, and *expectations of motherhood*, among others.

**Table 1.** Participant Demographic Information.

Pseudonym	Age at first pregnancy	Age at second pregnancy	Residence during pregnancy	Socioeconomic status	Age at time of interview	Preferred ethnic label(s)
<b>Anna</b>	18	—	colonia	Low-income	26	Mexican-American
<b>Isabella</b>	17	18	colonia	Low-income	18	Mexican
<b>Lidia</b>	15	—	colonia	Low-income	17	Hispanic
<b>Margaret</b>	17	19	colonia	Low-income	22	Hispanic and Mexican
<b>Maria</b>	15	—	colonia	Low-income	17	Hispanic
<b>Paula</b>	16	18	colonia	Low-income	19	Hispanic and Mexican
<b>Dakota</b>	18	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	21	Hispanic
<b>Faith</b>	17	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	20	Hispanic
<b>Jessica</b>	18	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	20	“American” and Hispanic
<b>Jordan</b>	17	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	20	Hispanic and white
<b>Josephina</b>	17	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	22	Hispanic and Latina
<b>Kelly</b>	18	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	22	Hispanic and white
<b>Megan</b>	17	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	17	Hispanic
<b>Olivia</b>	17	—	Las Cruces	Middle-income	20	Hispanic
<b>Renee</b>	15	17	Las Cruces	Middle-income	20	Hispanic and white

At the same time, the deliberately open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to introduce unexpected themes, such as *pressure from boy-friends* and *contradiction in stated intentions*. These inductively-established themes were developed through line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts by the author. The codes were operationalized based on both theory and participant-described experiences and sorted into a matrix (Bernard, 2011) to expose patterns of declaration, frequency, omission, similarity, co-occurrence, corroboration, and sequence (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999, p. 248-249). These patterns were narrowed into a select amount of central ideas (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and analyzed according to the intersectional identity construction framework. That is, interpretation of prominent themes centered on how the young women's narratives of reproduction communicated agency in identity construction as well as macro-level constraints to agency.

## Findings

The interviews and observations revealed distinct patterns of experience and pregnancy intention among teenage girls in the colonias compared with girls in Las Cruces, reflecting the very different subject positions held by the young women in these two groups. All of the teens from the colonias were from low-income families, the majority were first- or second-generation immigrants, and all of them attended schools that had (at the time) limited resources for contraception education or access. The teens from Las Cruces, on the other hand, came from middle-income families, were unlikely to have parents who were recent immigrants, and attended schools with School Based Health Centers that confidentially provided them with information about and access to contraception. The findings are organized to reflect these differing patterns of experience.

### *Teen Pregnancy in the Colonias: Constrained Subject Positioning and Vulnerability to the Sterility Cuento*

All of the girls from the colonias reported growing up with strong family and community expectations that they would abstain from sex throughout their teen years. They explained that news of their pregnancies was met with shock, disappointment, or anger by family and friends because it meant the girls had "given up" their virginities or were "dumb" and naïve enough to let a boy take advantage of them. Prior to their pregnancies, in line with these abstinence expectations, the girls reported receiving no information from family members or their schools about contraception, and most of them recalled having

alarmingly low levels of knowledge about preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

At the same time, the girls told me they had experienced expectations from their boyfriends (all of whom were also Hispanic) that they would acquiesce to the young men's pressure for sex. In most of the cases, the young women framed their first sexual experiences as an anticipated form of reciprocation after their boyfriends had expressed the ultimate commitment: saying, "I love you." In other cases, however, the girls reported that their boyfriends had made the choice to initiate sex independent of the girls' input and expected the girls not to question their decision. Lidia, a 17-year-old mother of one, recounted,

It just happened. It just happened. We were in the room and then all the sudden . . . I couldn't believe it, but we were doing it . . . we were in bed. Then I was just talking 'cause I couldn't believe it. I was like, "Are we really doing it?" And he's like, "Hey, shut up, we havin' sex."

The girls' general lack of knowledge about contraception, sometimes combined with the expectation within their relationships to defer to their boyfriends' decision making, made them vulnerable to an even more alarming power dynamic: boyfriends telling apparently false stories of childhood injuries to the testicles that left them sterile. None of the participants from the colonias knew each other, lived in the same colonia, or had talked to each other before, yet four of the six young women had pregnancies that resulted from some version of what I have termed the *sterility cuento*, captured in the following story:

He thought he couldn't have kids because he got hit really hard and they told him he couldn't have babies. He had to get like um, stitches down there 'cause he started bleeding from one, from down there, so that's why he thought he couldn't have kids. (Paula, 18-year-old mother of 2)

Upon relaying the story to me, some of the young women expressed feeling conflicted about whether or not their boyfriends had been truthful. Paula, for example, pointed out that despite telling her the sterility cuento, her boyfriend also had frequently talked of having children with her in the future. After they began having unprotected sex due to his supposed sterility, he developed a hunch Paula was pregnant before she even considered the idea, and the pregnancy test he bought her turned out to be positive. Paula questioned the sincerity of her boyfriend's initial story. But because she already had a child from a previous relationship, when her boyfriend responded to the news with a desire to accept the responsibility of fatherhood for both children, she welcomed the

new pregnancy. In contrast, two of the participants expressed certainty that the story had been an intentional lie. Lidia, who had been told the sterility cuento, decided to get an abortion upon discovering her pregnancy. Her boyfriend responded that an abortion would not be an option, as he had been planning the pregnancy all along:

Boyfriends like to . . . like, "Oh, I can't have kids." Like this one, he lied to me . . . "I did this because I want to keep you," he said. "I want to keep you. That's why I planned this." Since then, I was like, "Ok, then. Pregnant. I am pregnant."

Margaret explicitly referred to the story as a "line." It was common in the area, she explained casually, for young men to tell their girlfriends that they were unable to have kids, and several previous boyfriends had used the line on her, which led to her first pregnancy. When asked whether she had ever heard of anyone else talking about male sterility as a line to convince young women to have unprotected sex, Margaret replied, "Yeah, my cousins, my aunt . . . my mom. Even my grandma!" Margaret motioned toward a collection of family photographs on the wall and pointed out one photo of a couple surrounded by children. "My grandpa used it on her," Margaret said, chuckling, and she explained that the story led to the first of six children her grandparents would have together. Combined, these young women's experiences suggest that the sterility cuento is not only widespread throughout the various colonias surrounding Las Cruces, but that it has been propagating throughout the area for quite some time.

### *Teen Pregnancy in Las Cruces: Cultural Pragmatism in the Construction of Alternative Adulthood Identities*

Unlike the young women from the colonias, the teen moms from Las Cruces had been exposed to significant diversity in cultural values and expectations. Although a few had parents who emigrated from Mexico, these young women distanced themselves from those they called "traditional Mexicans" and the chaste, domestic female gender roles they associated with Mexican culture. Instead, they chose to identify with mainstream American culture, sometimes identifying as American or White as well as Hispanic and distancing themselves from the "Mexican" ethnic label. In addition to the contraception resources offered by their schools, many of the girls' mothers had offered to help them obtain birth control if they felt they needed it.

All nine of the young women from Las Cruces described their teen pregnancies as accidents, with six explaining that their pregnancies resulted from mistakes in contraception use (mainly, forgetting to take their birth control

pills regularly). Yet, the other three young women plainly explained that they chose not to use the contraception available to them, that they expected to eventually become pregnant due to their lack of contraception use, and that they had not been opposed to the idea of becoming pregnant, sometimes thinking that a baby would be a positive addition. They expressed these behaviors and feelings despite describing their pregnancies as accidents. As such, I have categorized these pregnancies as *intentionally unprevented*. By focusing on these less common but less well-understood cases, I aim to respond to calls for qualitative insight into pregnancies that lie somewhere along the continuum between “intended” and “unintended” (Santelli et al., 2003).

Olivia generally tells people that her pregnancy at age 17 was an accidental result of being “just too lazy” to pick up her birth control prescription, and that birth control was “just something [she] didn’t think about.” Yet, during our interview, Olivia revealed that she and her boyfriend actually put more thought into the decision to not use contraception than she initially let on:

Like . . . we didn’t like, talk about having a kid, but we talked about like, well if we did have a kid, then this is what we would do. Like we were like planning and then we got pregnant. It was not something that we avoided, like we knew it was gonna happen . . . But it was never like in my head like, “Oh I’m gonna get pregnant . . .” Like for some reason I kind of always knew. And I’ve talked to other moms that were pregnant at my age, they’re like, “Yeah like I knew that too.”

Later, she went on to emphasize, “But I can say that I like I knew it was gonna happen, but not in the way that I had like planned it, like oh well at 17, that’s good.” Furthermore, Olivia looked forward to the prospect of having a baby: “. . . when the dad and I were having sex, I always knew it was gonna be a good thing. And I was, like, when I found out I was pregnant, I was excited . . .” Renae, who first became pregnant at age 15, and Josephina, who became pregnant at age 17, similarly described not using contraception and anticipating pregnancy. Renae and Josephina also let on that they had generally positive feelings, among others, upon discovering their pregnancies. As Renae put it, “I found out and I was like, ‘Crap,’ but I was kinda happy.” Josephina and her baby’s father shared their excitement together: “We were happy ’cause we were gonna be pregnant, and we were *not* like in a shock, like, ‘Oh my god this wasn’t supposed to happen.’ So, she wasn’t like, planned, but she was kind of planned.” Because these three young women avoided statements about explicitly planning their pregnancies, none of them provided direct commentary on their motives in becoming pregnant—or at least, in choosing not to prevent pregnancy. Yet, a common theme shared by the girls during the months leading up to their pregnancies was feeling unfulfilled and wanting a change in life. Renae, for example, had been feeling disconnected from her absent

family and stopped trying in school or caring about her grades. On some days, she did not even bother to show up to school. She explained, “So I felt, like, really empty for a long time. Like I was missing something. So whenever I found out I was pregnant it was kinda like less feeling emptiness.”

When asked whether they felt teen pregnancy was a negative phenomenon, each of these three young women explained that it was a poor decision for most teenage girls, but that they had been the exception. They defined themselves against their perceptions of “other teenage moms,” irresponsible “dumb girls” who gained their position by “open[ing] their legs” without committing to motherhood. Olivia, for example, felt that she alone derived purpose from becoming a teen mom:

I feel like it was a really positive thing like for me. I mean for most girls it's not . . . But for me, it was really good for me. It gave me purpose, it made me do everything. Because without my baby, I would not be doing anything.

Josephina attempted to distance herself from the teenager aspect of her identity altogether, insisting she was just a regular mom: “Like, girls that are my age . . . I don't get along with as well as moms that are like 30 something years old. Because that's the level I'm on. I'm not on like their level.” However, Josephina acknowledged that everyone around her saw her as a distinctly *teen* mother, and she responded to this categorization by continually highlighting how her accomplishments—graduating high school, getting married, finding a job—made her different from “most teen moms.”

Olivia and Renae also expressed pride in all they had accomplished as mothers. For instance, before becoming pregnant Renae had considered dropping out of high school. At the time of the interview she said she felt more motivated than ever by the responsibility to provide a good life for her kids. She was enrolled in college and expecting to receive her bachelor's degree in 2 more years. “And I'm only 20!” she boasted. Renae's relatives, who she said once expected her to be a high school dropout, now view her as responsible and express high expectations for her through actions such as buying her a car. Olivia, Renae, and Josephina enjoy these new, mature roles in their families. As Renae put it, “I think [motherhood] has changed my identity in the way that I see myself as a better person . . . I don't see myself as a dumb little girl anymore.”

## Discussion

By situating teen reproductive decisions in the process of adolescent identity construction, this study seeks to illustrate the ways young women occupying

specific intersectional social locations agentically reproduce or contest dominant narratives about their ethnic, gender, and class identities through their reproductive acts. At the same time, reinforcing McLean and Syed's (2015) argument that identity construction often involves less agency than narrative scholars have traditionally acknowledged, the stories that the participants in this study shared demonstrate how cultural and socioeconomic macro-level contexts may exert substantial constraints on processes of identification (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Indeed, the ways in which the young mothers from the colonias discussed their experiences of first intercourse and framed the decisions that led to their pregnancies conveyed, above all, identification as individuals lacking control.

Through their interview responses, the young women from the colonias emphasized socioeconomic disadvantages that limited the extent to which they could determine their reproductive acts. A number of scholars have emphasized that low-income youth disproportionately face structural barriers to contraception knowledge and resources (Chernick et al., 2015; Forte & Judd, 1998; Gilliam et al., 2004), and indeed, the colonias participants disclosed having sex for the first time with very little understanding of how conception happens or how to prevent it. Yet, their stories demonstrate that class disadvantage did not operate alone, but instead interacted with the girls' ethnic and gender positioning to limit their autonomy in their first sexual encounters. Two decades after Pamela Erickson's study of low-income Hispanic youth in Los Angeles (1998) and in a very different context, the cultural trope Erickson identified of male pressure for sex and female acquiescence in many ways defined and constrained the experiences of the girls from the colonias. These young women communicated being raised with expectations of preserving their virginities throughout their teen years, a finding which accords with traditional Hispanic gender attitudes (Erickson, 1998; James-Hawkins & Broaddus, 2016; Jimenez et al., 2002). Their parents seemingly saw no need to educate them about contraception and may have even viewed a discussion about contraception as an invitation to begin having sex (García, 2012). The girls then experienced contradictory expectations within the context of their romantic relationships, where they were expected to defer to their boyfriends' decision making about sex. Caught in this double bind, the situation exacerbated by structural barriers to contraception resources, the young women were perhaps overly eager to believe the sterility cuento, which provided a convenient way to "give in," as they would say, to their boyfriends' pressure without fear of tarnishing their reputations through pregnancy. Thus, we can only understand the reproductive experiences of this particular group of Hispanic teenage mothers by examining how axes of ethnic, gender, and class identity exert disadvantage not in an additive



way, but by interlocking to create specific intersectional positions (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990) in which girls feel passive in decisions about sex and contraception. These young women's emphasis on their own lack of participation in their sexual decisions underscores their feelings that their reproductive outcomes, and even their life outcomes, are not their own. For this reason, neither 'accidental' nor 'intended' appropriately characterize these young women's pregnancy intentions, as both descriptors imply a level of involvement beyond that which the girls felt they had in their reproductive decisions.

This is not to say that these young women had no agency in their identity construction. Quite the contrary, by stressing their families' and schools' failure to educate them and, in some cases, emphasizing their boyfriends' manipulative pressures, the young women from the colonias opposed the dominant narrative of individual moral responsibility that casts girls like them as unvirtuous and/or "dumb." Instead, these young mothers constructed identities as disempowered, using their narratives to convey the weight of oppression they felt. This alternative narrative—that their boyfriends' stories of sterility rather than their own personal failings led to their pregnancies—also helped the young women crystallize their feelings of passivity. Although itself a major source of disempowerment, becoming pregnant also served as a specific instance the young women could reference to encapsulate a number of macro-level constraints acting on them constantly. In this way, pregnancy became a symbol of the girls' position in an entire web of power relations, and relaying the sterility cuento became a means to contest these constraints.

Turning to the narratives of the young women from Las Cruces, we see how, despite occupying the same gender and ethnic-group categories, these more affluent and cosmopolitan young women constructed identity narratives that were strikingly different from those of the young mothers in the colonias. Through their narratives, the Las Cruces young mothers who chose not to prevent pregnancy conveyed, above all, deliberateness in their actions. These teens exercised agency not only in becoming pregnant, but also in denying their agency in becoming pregnant, contributing to careful identification as supposedly atypical teen moms, that is, successful young mothers who are better off because of their pregnancies. Rife with contradictions, their explanations have been constructed to avoid definitively classifying their pregnancies as "planned," while the young women revealed that their pregnancies were fully expected and desired. These contradictions in their narratives reflect deeper contradictions in broader American society's views of motherhood. While viewed in general as a marker of womanhood and ultimate source of purpose in a woman's life, motherhood among teenagers is considered a grave social problem marking deviance in racialized and classed ways (Barcelos &

Gubrium, 2014; Geronimus, 2004; Luker, 1996; Ward, 1995). Having internalized this mainstream valuing of motherhood as meaningful but *teen* motherhood as irresponsible and even immoral, the girls from Las Cruces were aware of the huge reputational cost of identifying not only as a teen mom, but as a teen mom who planned her pregnancy. Such an association would align them with the classed media imagery of selfish welfare mothers (Sparks, 2003; Yardley, 2008) or with the label of “dumb girl” who would “open [her] legs” without thinking about whether she was ready to become a mother. The young women in this study repeatedly expressed the latter stereotype, believing these “other,” immature teen moms with no futures were typical and thus explicitly distancing themselves from those teen moms. Barcelos and Gubrium (2014) and Kelly (2000) found a similar trend of distancing. As Barcelos and Gubrium put it, “This strategic move allows young mothers the space to construct their own nonproblematic identities largely without having to challenge the social problem construction of and contempt for early childbearing” (p. 471). Olivia, Renae, and Josephina could not have predicted exactly how becoming a teen mother would influence their lives, but their narratives indicate they had foreseen a semblance of the independence and purpose motherhood would provide despite their hesitance to contest the dominant social view of teen pregnancy *in general* as a mistake. Indeed, pragmatically framing their pregnancies as accidents contributed to their construction of identities as motivated, independent, middle-class mothers rather than archetypal, stigmatized, poor teen moms. In this way, the young women from Las Cruces resemble those studied by Coleman and Cater (2006), Breen and McLean (2010), and Sheeran et al. (2016), who considered motherhood necessary for self-transformation and the creation of purposeful life directions.

Unlike the girls from the colonias, who felt constricted in their sexual and reproductive decision making, the young mothers from Las Cruces experienced flexibility in shaping their reproductive outcomes, using motherhood as an impetus to forge identities as motivated, successful adults. Yet, these young mothers were not entirely free in their processes of identity construction. According to McLean and Syed (2015), dominant or “master” narratives invariably constrain even the most seemingly self-determined alternative narratives, and the stories by the young women from Las Cruces were no exception. To construct their personal narratives as being *atypical* teen moms, they had to reinforce the dominant narrative of the typical teen mom as irresponsible and selfish, using this caricature as a foil against which to emphasize their difference. Attempts to identify without engaging the dominant narrative of teen motherhood went unacknowledged by friends and family members, as when Josephina unsuccessfully sought to identify just as a “mom.” For these young women, processes of identification were constricted to the

category of *teen mom*, and they applied their energies toward redefining the range of this category.

Through narratives of passivity in the colonias and intentionally unprevented pregnancies in Las Cruces, all of the Hispanic teen mothers in this study leveraged their reproductive experiences to directly shape their processes of identification. Yet, for both groups, a focus exclusively on agency in understanding their identity processes would leave out some of most important influences on the young women's narratives. Whether bound by socioeconomic barriers and cultural double standards in the colonias or dominant stigmatizing narratives of teen moms in Las Cruces, external constraints played at least as large a role as agency in these young women's reproductive decisions and processes of identification.

### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

This study's small sample size prevents its findings from being generalizable to the population of Hispanic teen mothers in Doña Ana County or elsewhere. However, by including teens from diverse social locations, the sample does allow for important consideration of how various intersections of disadvantage and privilege shape Hispanic teens' reproductive intentions and identity construction in vastly different, sometimes unexpected ways. In addition, the choice to examine the narratives through a thematic lens was just one of many potential approaches to narrative analysis this study could have taken. Though this approach allowed for deep probing into themes of sex, contraception use, and pregnancy, it did not examine how my own subject positioning as interviewer may have affected how the young women constructed the narratives (Riessman, 2012). Finally, the study is most seriously limited by lack of participation from the young women's boyfriends, who were unwilling to talk with me about their experiences. Future studies would benefit from investigation into how young Hispanic men from various social locations experience reproductive decisions. (For an example of this type of study among a different population, see Paschal, Lewis-Moss, and Hsiao's [2011] examination of parenting roles among African American teen fathers.) Future research may also employ alternative methods of analysis, such as examining narratives of teen pregnancy as an interactional accomplishment between interviewer and participant (Riessman, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

One-size-fits-all explanations of Hispanic teen pregnancy dominate the media, policy reports, and even scholarly articles, whether depicting teenage

mothers as sexually irresponsible welfare drains, disempowered victims of structural inequality, or unacculturated traditionalists (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014). Contrary to these homogenizing narratives, a small but growing number of studies, including the present study, have shown that Hispanic teenage girls may arrive at motherhood through a range of different paths and with varying degrees of agency. All the participants in this study identified as young Hispanic women, but for those in the colonias, their experiences as not only low-income, but low-income and Hispanic and girls exposed primarily to conservative gender roles made them feel their choices were characterized by rigid constraints. Yet, by underscoring their own passivity, these young women quite agentially asserted an alternative to dominant narratives that cast teen mothers as unvirtuous or irresponsible. For them, pregnancy signified an actual embodiment of their position in a social landscape that allotted them little personal autonomy, and telling about their boyfriends' sterility cuentos allowed them to challenge, or at least question, these power hierarchies. The young mothers from Las Cruces, on the other hand, felt markedly less constrained by their ethnic, class, and gender positioning. By framing their intentionally unprevented pregnancies as accidents, these young women strategically defined themselves against the stigmatized archetype of the typical teen mom, instead highlighting purpose, motivation, and independence as the defining aspects of their identities. Yet, in reiterating stereotypes about "other" teenage moms, the young mothers from Las Cruces inadvertently reinforced the very narrative that constrained them from being recognized as the responsible, mainstream mothers they aspired to become. Challenging dominant narratives in some ways, reproducing them in others, the teens in this study demonstrate how choices about sex, contraception, pregnancy, and motherhood can be understood, for some, as critical points in the process of constructing one's identity.

In a somewhat unsatisfying way, this diversity of experience leaves no straightforward implications for how to close the ethnic gap in teen pregnancy, or whether policy makers and practitioners should aim to prevent teen pregnancy at all. As Barcelos and Gubrium point out (2014), social scientists would do well to question how their own work contributes to the construction and stigmatization of teen pregnancy as a social problem and thus reinforces dominant narratives that locate negative health and economic outcomes in early childbearing rather than in the structural forces that contribute to poverty. Yet, just like a cultural trope, the social construction of the teen pregnancy "problem" is grounded in the realities of some teens. A lack of material resources may be the primary barrier to a self-determined life for some young women, but becoming pregnant can further exacerbate their situations and limit their choices. For these girls, targeted pregnancy prevention efforts that

provide both contraception access and culturally relevant programming on respectful gender dynamics would go a long way in augmenting their control over their lives, even though such programs do not attempt to target the broader structural inequalities that produce their circumstances. At the same time, treating teen pregnancy as a problem in all cases reinforces the stigmatizing narratives that prevent some teens from being able to successfully construct identities as the hardworking, motivated, and committed mothers they have worked so hard to become. As with many dichotomies, when it comes to advocating for prevention of teen pregnancy (by far the most dominant agenda in the public sphere) versus acceptance of teen pregnancy (as touted by some social scientists), the best path lies somewhere in between. The stories of ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, and always complex decision making that the young mothers of Doña Ana County shared defy simplistic explanations and solutions. By gaining comfort with this complexity, we can more accurately render teens' diverse experiences and support a multiplicity of avenues toward the types of identities young women seek.

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### **Note**

1. The use of the term *Hispanic* reflects the preferred ethnic label of the majority of participants. While four of the participants identified explicitly as "Mexican" or "Mexican American," others preferred the Hispanic label despite having Mexican family origins. Only one participant referred to herself as "Latina."

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